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Experiencing motherhood and fatherhood with learning difficulties in Austria: The need for self-determined support

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Accessible summary

- Some parents with learning difficulties are supported by child welfare in raising their child. Many mothers and fathers with learning difficulties have their child removed.
- This paper is the first published research about being a mother and being father with learning difficulties in Austria. There is not enough good quality support for parents with learning difficulties in Austria.
- We interviewed six mothers and five fathers with learning difficulties and asked them about who supports them and how. We also asked them what it means to them to be a mother or a father.
- Most parents said that they get the wrong support and are being checked on by child welfare. One mother said that she gets very helpful support.
- Being a mother with learning difficulties is different to being a father with learning difficulties. Mothers who have lived with their child feel that they are the main caregivers, but fathers sometimes feel excluded from their child's life.

Abstract

Background: Many parents with learning difficulties face high rates of child welfare intervention and child removal. In contrast to other high-income countries, there has not been any published research on the lives of mothers and fathers with learning difficulties from an Austrian perspective. After presenting an insight into the international literature and the Austrian context, original empirical findings relevant to providing professional support for parents with learning difficulties are introduced.

Method: As part of a larger qualitative study, ten individual parents with learning difficulties (six mothers and four fathers) were interviewed to gain insight into their experience of motherhood and fatherhood. During the interviews, participants were asked to visualise their social networks through network maps that were then included into analyses. The current paper primarily engages with parents' experience of professional practice based on a hermeneutic analysis of latent and manifest meanings.

Findings: The study results reinforce the relevance of social networks, including (a lack of) professional parenting support, and gendered parental self-understandings in

relation to barriers for parents with learning difficulties in Austria. Parents often experienced surveillance from child welfare professionals and referred to "being checked on" as well as receiving "the wrong support". Only one study participant experienced the (flexible and self-determined) support provided to her family as helpful. Mothers and fathers with learning difficulties face, at times, quite different challenges in the parenting role. The findings highlight a maternal self-understanding as being primarily responsible for their child, while fathers often felt excluded from their child's life.

Conclusions: Support services need to acknowledge the relevance of gendered parenting roles and intersections of multidimensional disadvantages. The parenting support currently available to mothers and fathers with learning difficulties (if available at all) needs radical improvement and nationwide support structures need to be installed in collaboration with families.

KEYWORDS
family support, gender, parenting, parents with learning disabilities, social services

1 | INTRODUCTION

Mothers and fathers with learning difficulties are parents, who are disabled by different types of barriers and have been labelled through various forms of diagnostics and/or the educational system as 'having' a (e.g. learning or 'mental') disability. Authors writing from the UK have used the term *parents with learning difficulties* to include not only parents labelled as having a learning disability but also "[…] the far wider group of parents who do not have a formal diagnosis but struggle with similar issues" (Tarleton & Turney, 2020, p.388). Self-advocates[1] have expressed their preference to be referred to as persons with learning difficulties as they find the term "more dignified" (Goodley, 2001, p.217) and aim to emphasise a lifelong learning perspective (Scheiblauer & Kofler, 2009; Wibs, 2005).

The lives of parents (mostly mothers, cf. McConnell, Feldman, & Aunos, 2017; Symonds et al., 2020) with learning difficulties and their families have received growing attention in research from an increasing number of countries, yet there has not been any published research from an Austrian perspective. Additionally, there has been scarce public and professional discourse (e.g. in disability services) on parenting by persons with learning difficulties and the provision of self-determined support services to families who require assistance (Kassoume & Köberl, 2009).

Austria has ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and thus committed to adjust national legislation according to the stipulations made in the CRPD. This includes the right of disabled parents and their families to receive adequate support services in order to ensure equal access to parenthood and in raising their children (article 23). Austria's official strategies and documents regarding the implementation of the CRPD touch upon article 23, but they primarily focus on disabled children whilst disabled parents remain at the margins (cf. BMASGK, 2019; BMASK, 2012). Disabled people's organisations view the unanswered need for nationwide support structures for all disabled parents and their children as problematic (Monitoringausschuss, 2019; ÖAR, 2013) and the national self-advocacy network of people with learning difficulties (*Netzwerk Selbstvertretung Österreich*) has protested against child removal without previous adequate support and parental agreement (Föllerer & Rauchberger, 2019).

2 | BACKGROUND

Parents with learning difficulties in high-income states face high rates of child welfare interventions, often resulting in the removal of their child from their care (McConnell, Feldman, Aunos, & Pacheco, 2017; Pixa-Kettner, 2008; Tøssebro et al., 2017). Scholars relate the overrepresentation in the child welfare system to marginalised living circumstances (Emerson & Brigham, 2013, 2014), lack of support (Cleaver & Nicholson, 2007) and prejudice towards people with learning difficulties (McConnell & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2010). Research from Canada, the UK, Iceland and Australia has provided insight into the family lives of parents with learning difficulties, with a notable proportion of the literature highlighting the relevance of different types of social support (MacLean & Aunos, 2010; Tarleton & Heslop, 2020; Tarleton & Porter, 2012; Tarleton & Ward, 2007; Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008) and of support networks (Llewellyn, 1995; Llewellyn & McConnell, 2002).

The UK has perhaps had the longest political debate about specialist services for parents with learning difficulties (cf. Tarleton & Turney, 2020), resulting in England and Scotland publishing best practice guidelines, initially in 2007 and 2009, respectively (Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability, 2015; Working

[1]For a discussion of what self-advocacy of persons with learning difficulties entails, see Aspis (1997).

TABLE 1 Basic participant information

Mother/father	Marital status	Number of children <18	Age of child	Child residence
Mother	In relationship	2	4	With parents
			16	With mother + partner
Mother	In relationship	1	5	With foster family
Mother	In relationship	1	5	With parents
Mother	Single	1	15	Child welfare facility
Mother	In relationship	1	1	With foster family
Mother	Married	2	5	Child welfare facility
			7	Child welfare facility
Father	In relationship	1	6	With foster family
Father	Single	2	12	With mother
			14	Child welfare facility
Father	In relationship	1	12	With parents
Father	In relationship	1	15	Child welfare facility

Together with Parents Network, 2016), to ensure human rights, promote across-agency collaborations and present a best practice informed approach to *supported parenting/parenting with support*[2] (Tarleton et al., 2006). The English guidelines are based on "five features of good practice," namely "accessible information and communication, clear and co-ordinated referral and assessment processes and eligibility criteria, support designed to meet the needs of parents and children based on assessment of their needs and strengths, long-term support, if necessary," and "access to independent advocacy" (Working Together with Parents Network, 2016, p.ii).

Recent studies from Tarleton and colleagues (Tarleton & Heslop, 2020; Tarleton & Porter, 2012; Tarleton & Turney, 2020) show promising practice developments in England towards an emphasis on parental strengths and the objective to support families, rather than to remove children. Contrary to England, services for disabled parents are chronically underdeveloped in Austria (Monitoringausschuss, 2019). This is despite an ongoing practice debate and growing body of literature in our neighbouring country Germany (e.g. Düber et al., 2020; Lenz et al., 2010; Pixa-Kettner, 1998, 2008).

An early nationwide study from Germany (Pixa-Kettner, 1998) found different parental experiences of professional support (when it was available), affected by tensions between receiving assistance in raising their child and being controlled. More recent German literature (Düber, 2019; Lenz et al., 2010; Sprung et al., 2020) continues to point out similar challenges in professional support and a lack of cooperation between different service systems (disability services and child welfare). According to Düber (2019), parents with learning difficulties receive a broad range of support services from professionals and commonly experience them as helpful. However, parents criticise staff rotation and service accessibility and note tensions between professional closeness and distance, encouragement and paternalism.

Düber et al.'s multiperspective project produced practice recommendations for *supported parenting* (*Begleitete Elternschaft*, see Sprung et al., 2020), including human rights principles as well as remarks on inclusion and participation and needs for improvement of support structures (Riesberg & Sprung, 2020). Their research also initiated a position paper from parents with learning difficulties, in which they express their expectations towards professional support (e.g. family-centred support, parental self-determination, transparency, respect and trust) and define their needs (e.g. paid employment, financial support and more family services) in order to lead a better live as a family (MOBILE e.V., 2020).

However, the research from an Austrian context that will be introduced hereafter shows findings that differ from good practice recommendations. In the absence of official practice guidelines for parenting support, and interventions carried out regionally variably under federal child welfare law, most parents with learning difficulties and their children do not receive tailored support services (Kassoume & Köberl, 2009).

3 | METHOD

The empirical data upon which this paper is based emerged from the first author's doctoral research, a qualitative study exploring the meaning of learning difficulties in relation to being a mother or father in Austria from three different perspectives (public discussions on the Internet, professional experience and parental experience). Findings from the larger study are discussed in detail in the first author's forthcoming monograph (More, in press). The current paper primarily engages with parents' experience of professional practice by drawing from Smith et al.'s (2009) approach to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The *double-hermeneutics* approach of IPA ("the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant

[2]See Tarleton & Turney (2020, p.391) for a discussion of *supported parenting/parenting with support*.

making sense of x", Smith et al., 2009, p.187), as well as its' emphasis on meaning, fitted well with the larger study's hermeneutic metatheoretical framework and the empirical search for latent and manifest meanings (Smith, 2019).

Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews with ten individuals with learning difficulties who each were a parent to at least one child under the age of 18. None of the interviewees were couples. All parents were eligible for disability services, meaning they had been officially 'diagnosed' and labelled as disabled persons at some point in their lives. Participants were initially recruited through self-advocacy agencies (n = 4); however, because of few eligible participants, recruitment also occurred through personal networks (n = 1) and disability services from four different areas (n = 5).

Six mothers and four fathers were recruited (see Table 1), of whom most had a partner (one mother and one father were single). The participants were parents to one or two children under the age of eighteen with children's age varying from four to sixteen years (M = 9). Three parents lived with their children at the time of the interviews, three had lived with their child previously but their children were removed from home (one to three years ago) and now lived in foster care, and four parents had at no time lived with their children, they had been separated from birth (n = 3). Additionally, one father had never met his children because at first their mothers had prevented any contact and later he felt insecure about meeting his children.

Interview schedules were designed following Smith et al. (2009) recommendations for IPA and included open-ended questions about family life and what being a person with learning difficulties as well as being a mother or father meant to the participants. They were asked about their experience of support in the parenting role, social networks and their communication with others (e.g. family, other parents, professionals) as a mother or father. Depending on the family living situation, several questions focused on involvement with child welfare services, the parental perspective on children's foster placement and the parental experience of visitation contacts with their child. To explore the social context of the parenting experience further, participants were asked to visualise their social networks through network maps during the interview.

The use of social network maps pre-designed by the first author was explained and offered to all participants before the interview. All but one participant agreed to using this tool. The egocentric map design (meaning that social contacts were arranged along evenly distributed concentric circles around the "me" at the centre, see Straus, 2008, p.528) was based on a previous German study with parents with learning difficulties (Pixa-Kettner & Rohmann, 2012). The map was divided into four areas: *family*, *friends*, *professionals* and *others*. Following Pixa-Kettner and Rohmann, participants defined both the closeness of their social relationships in the parenting role on the map and used three types of smiley-stickers (positive, neutral, negative) to determine relationship quality.

Participants added to the social network map throughout the interview, whenever they mentioned persons that were part of their networks. Then, they were asked to speak about their relationship to the mentioned person and their relevance to supporting participants in their parenting role. The intention was not to expand this into a full network analysis, but to offer an additional communication stimulus and use the maps as an expansion of verbal information.

All interview transcripts (including social network maps) were analysed separately at first, drawing from multistep IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Multiple readings, exploratory comments and notes on the meaning-making process (Smith, 2019) of each participant resulted in the designation of initial (individual) themes for each participant that were later drawn together for cross-participant analysis. After creating a structure of themes for each participant, superordinate themes were established through an inductive process of abstraction, contrasting and comparing detailed narratives of different interviews. This was closely documented through audit trails (Shaw, 2010) and those discussed with other researchers in various group-settings (see Table 2 for an example).

Several superordinate themes were drafted, tested against the data from different interviews and then redrafted repeatedly, "moving from the part to the whole" and then "connecting the part back to the whole" (Smith et al., 2009, pp.104–105). Through the process of moving back and forth between data and interpretation, some themes were reconfigured and relabelled. Ultimately, seven superordinate themes were clustered and organised into two to five subthemes each (Shaw, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). Those themes (see Table 3) highlighted both collective similarities and individual contrasts in the experience of mother- and fatherhood with learning difficulties in Austria.

The research proposal for the larger study was presented to and approved by one of the University of Klagenfurt's doctoral committees in November 2017. At that time, the University did not have a general ethics committee; thus, it was not possible to seek formal ethical approval, but the author addressed the research ethics in her proposal to the doctoral committee, for example, asymmetric power relations, anonymity and potential risks and benefits for study participants of a marginalised group (Nind, 2008). Transparency of information about the research was ensured through accessible language, both verbally and written. Anonymity and confidentiality were addressed with participants (e.g. "Your participation in this project is anonymous. Anonymous means that I won't tell other people your real name."), and they all gave informed and written consent. Measures taken to protect participants' anonymity were the use of synonyms and the composition of fictional case studies.

Hereafter, a summary of findings relevant to providing professional support for parents with learning difficulties will be introduced by drawing from several (sub-)themes, focusing on (a) the relevance of the social network, especially of professional ties, and (b) (gendered) parental self-understandings in the light of professional support.

TABLE 2 Exemplary audit-trails

Superordinate theme	Subtheme	Participant	Individual theme/s	(Shortened) quote	Transcript line
The child welfare agency in-between support and control	child welfare's control as danger to family life	Mrs. Q	The *wrong ones* from the child welfare agency Criticisms from child welfare—but no help	"they [the professionals] were always the wrong ones. They didn't help and instead […] insisted that we should do this and that, but never explained […] how to do it. No help."	502–505
		Mr V	Support as control	"well not support, they just checked how I was doing with the children […] went and came again two weeks later to check."	II, 70–75
The ambivalence of the social network	Parents' person-dependent experience of professionals	Mrs. N	Flexibility in support Accessible professionals	"two, three times or just once a week […] now we have our own WhatsApp-group and I'll just post something there, because there they are always within reach."	629–641
Gendered orientations of the parenting role	Self-understanding as 'normal parents' and as part of a group of parents	Mr. U	Being treated normally, *technically* being a normal father	"like I'm *technically* a normal father"	686–687
	Experiencing validation/ recognition in the maternal/ paternal role	Mrs. P	Visitations as pleasant experience	"when I get to hold her […] when she sits on my lap"	462–463
		Mrs. I	Experiencing validation through closeness and affection	"when they come to cuddle […] say 'mum, I love you'"	224–225

TABLE 3 Superordinate themes and subthemes

Superordinate themes	Gendered orientations of the parenting role	Learning difficulties as lifeworld experience and internalised label	Parental reflexivity
Subthemes	Motherhood and mothering as formalised learning process	Regretting and refusing the label of disability	Setting value on child's education
	Self-understanding as 'normal parents' and as part of a group of parents	Claiming learning difficulties as self-designation	Reacting on child's challenging behaviour
	Experiencing validation/ recognition in the maternal/ paternal role		Falling back on own upbringing

4 | FINDINGS

Before introducing specific empirical findings, two composite case studies (Mrs. A and Mr. B) are presented to contextualise participants' experiences biographically.

4.1 | Mrs. A

Mrs. A, forty years old and mother to a school aged child, experienced a difficult upbringing and can't count on family support. Mrs. A was labelled as having learning difficulties in school and attended special education (as did all participants). She then worked in a sheltered workplace and had a long-term partner when she discovered her pregnancy. A manager in her workplace informed child welfare to establish a support network for the mother to be, but as a result, Mrs. A experienced surveillance from the very beginning of motherhood. The threat of child removal felt omnipresent to her and after she had resisted child welfare for a few years, her child was eventually removed and placed in a group home. Mrs. A is permitted visits every other week but experiences an increasing distance in the relationship with her child. Her partner (the father of their child) is involved in visits, but from her own perspective Mrs. A seems to be the primary force in maintaining a relationship with their child. The couple received counselling to deal with the child removal at some point but were ultimately left alone with the current situation.

4.2 | Mr. B

Mr. B, in his early fifties and father to two teenagers, spent part of his childhood in a child welfare institution. Whilst Mr. B still has a loose family support network, he expresses ambivalent feelings towards his family of origin. He has been in a precarious employment situation and struggles with poverty. Mr. B has had several partners, two of his previous relationships resulted in the birth of his children (from two different mothers). He fought to be part of his children's lives but has felt excluded. Recently, one of his children sought contact to Mr. B, after having been placed in a child welfare group home. Mr. B's other child now lives with a foster family. Contacts between father and children are infrequent, partly due to geographical distance and high travelling costs. Mr. B would have liked assistance from child welfare in the fathering role, but he never received any professional support. His hopes are tied to the future, when his children will come of age and will be able to make their own decisions about their contact with him.

5 | THE RELEVANCE OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK

As the composite case studies imply, study participants' social networks were not always a particularly strong or reliable source for parenting support. The network maps created as part of the interviews showed that the number of parents' contacts ranged from four to fifteen (M = 8.2) and most fell into the categories of family and professionals (35% each). Of the remaining 30%, 18% were declared as friends and 12% as others (e.g. neighbours). Parents living with their children had more people in their social network than parents whose child had been removed and parents who lived with their child defined the majority of their network ties as positive. Participants received parenting advice, help with childcare, financial support and transportation to visit their child in foster care from their social networks, especially from their family.

Four parents viewed family members as supportive, four had at least partly conflicted relationships with family and two parents defined their family ties as negative. The positive experience was linked to close family ties, whilst ambivalent or negative feelings towards family were explained by outdated parenting advice (Mrs. N), care needs of ageing family members (Mrs. Q), variable quality of relationships (Mr. J), a patronising mother (Mr. L), the family's lack of interest in the child's life (Mr. V) and family violence (Mrs. K). All but one parent mentioned having at least one friend and sometimes their friends were parents, in which case they appreciated their

The ambivalence of the social network	The child welfare agency in-between support and control	Dealing with their child being in foster care	Being discredited as mother/father
Conflicting experience of the other parent	The child welfare agency's monopoly of power	Embodied experience of separation and motherhood	Degradation and assault in public spaces
The financial role of the family of origin	child welfare's control as danger to family life	(Re-)producing legitimations for child removal	Underestimation and degradation during pregnancy
Relevance and ambivalence of the family of origin		Restrictions of visitation rights	Discreditation and discrimination in the child welfare system
Parents' person-dependent experience of professionals		Alternative understanding of parenthood	
Being left on own devices		Resisting child removal	

advice. Six parents expressed conflicted relationships with their current or former partner (mother/father to their child) and three described parenting as a task they shared with their partner.

5.1 | Formal support: Surveillance in contrast to self-determination

Besides informal contacts, professionals played an important role in the lives of study participants. All families were (or had been) subjected to child welfare interventions but only one mother currently received professional parenting support (as well as additional support from disability services). Parents either viewed professionals in their lives as positive or negative, but rarely in a neutral way. Strong feelings towards (especially child welfare) professionals became clear in statements as the following. Mrs. Q described how she and her family had gotten "the wrong support" and said:

> They [the professionals] were always the wrong ones. They didn't help and instead [...] insisted that we should do this and do that, but never explained [...] how to do it. No help.

Her interpretation of the support and the professionals as unhelpful or "wrong" connected to an experience of control, because the workers investigated the family home and made demands yet never explained how she and her husband could improve the situation. As a result, Mrs. Q as well as other parents viewed home visits as humiliating and pointless. Asked about his experience of professional support one of the fathers, Mr. V, answered:

> Well not support, they just checked how I was doing with the children [...] went and came again two weeks later to check.

In Mr. V's opinion, those home visits had little purpose other than to check in on him and his children and visits were eventually terminated. Another father, Mr. U, reflected on his experience with child welfare services in the past. He explained:

> They came, looked to see if the flat was in order. They checked what I earn and whether I take care of the children, and that was just an examination.

The quote emphasises the interpretation of child welfare as controlling authority, reduced to making various enquiries about the life of the (at that point) single father with learning difficulties. All but one parent of those who had at some point received parenting support felt about this in a similar way.

The only parent currently receiving professional parenting support, Mrs. N, experienced the professionals in her life (mostly) as helpful, accessible and respectful towards herself and her family. She said:

> [The support workers] come two, three times or just once a week [...] now we have our own WhatsApp-group and I'll just post something there, because there they are always within reach.

In Mrs. N's sense making, she viewed the professional support as self-determined, both because she had a say in the frequency of services and because professionals would "usually involve" herself and her partner when working with their son (e.g. tidying up together or playing). If Mrs. N had any questions, she could reach out to professionals through social media, yet she clearly identified this as professional support (in contrast to family or friends) on her social network map.

6 | (GENDERED) PARENTAL SELF-UNDERSTANDINGS

The importance of professionals in parents' lives was also reflected through their parental self-understanding. Mothers and fathers understood themselves first and foremost as such, irrespective of

being labelled as disabled/having learning difficulties. They wanted to be perceived as normal parents and valued being "treated normally" by professionals engaging with their family (e.g. Mrs. I, Mrs. N, Mrs. O, Mr. V). Yet, expressions as "like I'm *technically* a normal father" (Mr. U) implied feelings of difference. Further, parental self-understandings were linked to gendered parenting roles, highlighting differences in the experience of mother- and fatherhood with learning difficulties.

6.1 | Motherhood

All mothers expressed the importance of physical closeness as well as warmth and affection on behalf of their child to them, for instance: "When I get to hold her [...] when she sits on my lap" (Mrs. P) or: "When they come to cuddle [...] say 'mum, I love you'" (Mrs. I). Physical closeness was important to mothers irrespective of their child's living situation that is even when they had few contacts with their child.

Mothers who lived or had lived with their child saw themselves as primary caregiver, regardless of the presence of a partner. This showed through mothers' understandings of their partners as (in the best case) supporting them rather than being equal (parenting-) partners. Mrs N. said about her partner:

> We need him. He cooks sometimes and looks after our boy. When I have a headache, for example, he looks after the boy.

Mrs. Q, when asked whether she wanted to add her husband (whom she had mentioned several times) to her social network map, answered:

> Do I have to? [she laughs] [...] well sure, in the family section. Well, only at times, once or twice maybe [...] he does some housework or fixes stuff.

6.2 | Defending pregnancies and being underestimated

Analysis suggested that all of the mothers had, either explicitly or in a more latent way, defended their pregnancies against interference from family or professionals. Two mothers talked about their own mothers having tried to pressure them into an abortion and a third, Mrs. P., implied attempted interference by stating:

> I said this often, I want... I don't want to abort it. I want to have it.

Three women claimed they had discovered their pregnancies late, two of whom said that others (a friend and disability services professionals) realised they were pregnant before they realised themselves. The late reveal of pregnancies has been identified as a strategy of resisting involuntary abortions (Traustadóttir & Sigurjónsdóttir, 2010) and this might have applied to the women in this study, too.

All mothers had been underestimated in relation to motherhood, the majority also during pregnancy, by family and/or professionals. Mrs. N said:

> The disability services professional contacted child welfare because she thought it was overburdening me from the beginning, with a child, and because I had to manage everything with short notice.

She felt that she was underestimated but soon after birth, it became clear that she adapted well to mothering. Mrs O on the other hand felt underestimated by her mother, when she told her about her pregnancy. She said:

> Mum didn't find it particularly good, but she accepted it later. She thought I wouldn't be able to deal with the child.

For two mothers, a lack of confidence in their mothering abilities in combination with tailored support services not available resulted in the removal of their child shortly after birth.

6.3 | The embodied maternal experience of separation

The sense making of the two mothers whose children were removed shortly after birth was linked closely to the physical aspects of motherhood and was in the analysis interpreted as embodied experience. Mrs. K's daughter was removed from her shortly after birth and has lived with a foster family since, thus her descriptions of the removal and her perception of her newborn's reactions seemed inconsistent yet gave voice to her embodied experience of the removal and the depth of her emotional pain. First, she described child welfare professionals "dragging" her child away and "pulling" the newborn from her arms. Second, she expressed how, in her memory, her (newborn!) daughter might have cried: "Mum, why are you giving me away?". This memorisation points to the mother's latent worries that her daughter might (someday) think she had "given her away." Third, Mrs. K explained that she had had a caesarean section and was not allowed to see her daughter before she was taken to the foster family. Finally, the mother explained that her daughter had "tried to babble" the words "why are you giving me away" and reinforced the embodiment of her experience by pointing out the pain she felt in her c-section scar.

Another mother, Mrs. P, dealt with the experience of her daughter's removal in separating her self-understanding as her child's mother (during pregnancy and the first few days at the

hospital, after she gave birth) and as having a daughter in foster care. Her experience of motherhood was tied to the physicality of pregnancy and the physical care for her newborn but was now limited to holding her daughter during short visits, always in presence of the foster family. In Mrs. P's sense making, she viewed the foster mum as her child's mother and gave a visitation situation as an example. Mrs. P said:

> The foster mum did it all. I don't need to, she does it all. Gives her the bottle beforehand. She's used to her and only takes the bottle from her [...] because she's always with her. She's not always with me.

6.4 | Fatherhood

Participants' experience of fatherhood differed to the experience of motherhood. Fathers living (or having lived) with their child emphasised their role as their child's teacher, as Mr. V said:

> I taught him about the sights on the main street, the opera. He needed that for school.

Another father, Mr. U, explained:

> They [his children] learn about learning disability. When she [his daughter] watches TV and they show something on guardianship, I tell her what it means. I talk to her.

Mr. J, on the other hand, who is father to a daughter in foster care, emphasised the highly gendered role of the financial provider. However limited his financial contribution was because of poverty, he took pride in fulfilling this role. Mr. J said:

> At least I know I've helped financially, added something to the jar.

and

> "I don't care about myself, I just look out for my little one, so one day she'll know that her father provided for her."

6.5 | Being excluded and "fighting" for fatherhood

All fathers had at some point felt excluded from their child's live by professionals and/or the mother of their child, and they experienced a lack of support. The experience of exclusion was reinforced through their social network maps. Especially, Mr. V made clear he "had no one" to support him and child welfare "went behind my back," whilst sticking negative smileys to his map. He added an additional sad smiley to represent "no one," that is the complete lack of supportive ties from his perspective.

Two of the fathers had had to "fight" child welfare in order to maintain (Mr. V) or establish (Mr. J) a relationship to their child/children. Mr. V said:

> I had to fight for two and a half years to get my kids back [...] child welfare said 'You be glad that you have your peace. You can do as you wish, and they are better off [in a home].'

Mr J described how he had to "fight" child welfare restrictions to meet his daughter after she was born and how child welfare had incorrectly presumed that he was not interested in being part of his child's live. He said:

> They claimed that I allegedly hadn't contacted my child but that wasn't at all true. I called child welfare immediately [...] then they granted me visitation rights, thank god. I had to fight for two years.

6.6 | Paternal experience of surveillance and barriers

Linked to the paternal sense making of having to "fight" for fatherhood, Mr. U talked about how he had experienced heightened surveillance on behalf of child welfare when he had been a single father. He saw child welfare as a narrow surveillance system that was especially endangering the rights of single fathers with learning difficulties, pointing out intersections of dis/ability and gender. He said:

> A father who isn't learning disabled and who's married, they don't get into trouble with child welfare [...] where child welfare should go, they don't. They always go to learning disabled parents who really can do it. They can really do it [...] but they should get support. And a team.

Mr. L's experience on the other hand was a stark contrast to the other fathers, since he claimed, on the surface, that he "didn't feel like a father." A close analysis of his latent sense making led, however, to the interpretation, that whilst Mr. L pretended disinterest in fatherhood, a number of barriers in his environment had prevented him from engaging with his children. He explained how he felt it was too late for him to get to know his children and said:

> I wouldn't know what to say, I don't even know them [...] if I had had more support from the beginning, but no. My mother... she was there for my sister [when she became a mother] [...] but for me... nah.

7 | DISCUSSION: THE NEED FOR SELF-DETERMINED SUPPORT

The various challenges experienced by mothers and fathers with learning difficulties in Austria suggest a need for social change. We argue that self-determined parenting support could empower families, but currently available services (if available at all) need radical improvement and nationwide support structures need to be installed. The experience of surveillance, child removal and lack of support highlights the scarce possibilities for people with learning difficulties to fulfil their parenting role. Parents who had been supported from professionals in the past referred to "being checked on" and "the wrong support" rather than actual support in raising their child. The only positive example of parenting support reported in this study gives a rough idea of self-determined, flexible and accessible support that the particular mother perceived as helpful and respectful.

Mothers and fathers in the study encountered specific challenges, partly linked to their gendered self-understandings. Having to defend their (emerging) motherhood from the beginning and dealing with the embodied experience of separation, child removal had for instance a different meaning to mothers than to fathers. Other research (Janeslätt et al., 2019; Mayes & Llewellyn, 2012) emphasises ongoing support for mothers with learning difficulties whose children have been removed and for support services to consider mothers' differing support needs when they have a child in foster care. This was, however, not the reality for the mothers in the current study.

Fathers in this study felt excluded from their child's life, or from decisions made about it, and had to "fight" for fatherhood. For three of four fathers, the experience of exclusion was tied to periods of absence from their children. Paternal absence was also noted by Symonds et al. (2020, p.9) and designated as "interrupted fatherhood" of fathers with learning difficulties. In the current study, one father's absence was not limited to a period but total, meaning that he never got to know his children. Thus, in his case, fatherhood was not only interrupted; it was prevented fatherhood.

We conclude that support services should acknowledge gendered dimensions of parenthood as well as intersections of disability, class and gender[3]. Professionals need to be cautious not to reproduce inequalities by focusing primarily on mothers (see first author's forthcoming monography). Because of the lack of research and awareness of good practice in professionally supporting parents with learning difficulties in Austria, child welfare and service providers have little evidence to build on in the national context. However, the English and German literature (e.g. Düber, 2019; Tarleton & Ward, 2007) and practice guidelines/recommendations already provide a solid starting point.

[3]Those were the most relevant social categories for the participants in this study. For other parents further marginalisation, for example through sexuality or race, might be relevant.

Interestingly, English findings (Tarleton & Porter, 2012) emphasise specialist support services for parents with learning difficulties whilst the German scholars (Sprung et al., 2020) strongly argue for inclusive mainstream services. However, in content the English guidelines and German recommendations overlap widely. Both view a human rights approach, parents' right to participate in all processes and the cooperation of different services vital to ensuring tailored support.

Düber's (2019) research in Germany especially highlights that parents value self-determination through participating in planning support and being part of professionals' decision-making processes regarding their child. Thus, in Austria social service providers, including child welfare and disability services, and professionals working with mothers and fathers with learning difficulties should initiate improvements to the current lack of adequate support in close collaboration with families.

8 | CONCLUSION

The study sample was small (n = 10) and somewhat heterogeneous, which might be viewed as shortcoming, but we stress that the sample heterogeneity is important to inform the development of tailored services because in practice professionals work with a very heterogeneous group of parents with learning difficulties. The apparent need for development in child welfare services calls both for the involvement of self-advocates with learning difficulties and for further research on perspectives of mothers and fathers with learning difficulties in Austria.

The research reported in this paper has resulted in alliances of parents, researchers and professionals, including collaborative presentations, conferences and the initiation of an informal network that aims for self-determined parenting of mothers and fathers with learning difficulties—whenever needed with professional support.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not shared.

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